

SAMUEL M. NICKERSON HOUSE



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(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

SAMUEL M. NICKERSON HOUSE

40 East Erie Street

Burling and Whitehouse, architects

Completed 1883

In the years following the Chicago Fire of 1871, the Near North Side became a fashionable place to live. This area, just north of the city's growing commercial district, was the neighborhood of such prominent families as the McCormicks of the reaper industry, the Leiters of the dry-goods business, and the Ryersons of the lumber trade. Most of these families' elegant homes have since been destroyed or drastically altered, but, on the northeast corner of Erie and Wabash, one of the most impressive of these Victorian homes still stands, looking much as it did in the 1880s. The Nickerson house, built by Samuel Mayo Nickerson, survives as a particularly rich example of the type of home built by Chicago's elite during the city's Victorian era.

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The Victorian era in Chicago coincided with a period of rapid growth and the consequent rise of a wealthy entrepreneurial class. This group created a milieu in which the architectural and decorative tastes of the period were indulged to extremes. Eclecticism is the term often used to describe the Victorian period, a time when historical styles were revived and an excess of ornament became the vogue. In the homes of men like Nickerson, this trend fostered an extravagant and unequaled display of expensive taste.

Nickerson was prominent in Chicago's financial circles as well as in the city's burgeoning cultural life. He had come to Chicago in 1858 with barely a penny, but twenty-five years later was able to build a house valued at \$450,000. His financial success can be attributed to his energy and sharp business sense. His initial venture, making fine wines and liquors, was a huge success. During the Civil War he was involved in the manufacture of explosives, and his fortunes increased enough so that in just six years he could retire from that business and devote his energies to finance. In 1863, he had joined with several other businessmen to found the First National Bank of Chicago and was named its president in 1867. Nickerson's conservative banking philosophy helped guide this important institution through its first thirty years. During that time Nickerson also founded and was president of the Chicago Street Railway Company and was president of the Union Stockyards National Bank as well.

An engraving of Samuel M. Nickerson published in 1892.
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



A recent photograph of the Nickerson House showing the John B. Murphy Memorial to the east.
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

Nickerson's contributions to Chicago were not limited to his financial accomplishments. He was instrumental in promoting Chicago's development and cultural growth and was an active devotee of the fine arts. In 1864, he was director of the Chamber of Commerce. He also served actively on the Lincoln Park Board of Commissioners which established the much-needed North Side park. He is credited with promoting one of Chicago's earliest musical endeavors, the May Festivals, and was a long-standing member of the Chicago Historical Society. He served as a trustee of the Art Institute from the time of its incorporation in 1879 and demonstrated his appreciation of art by leaving a \$50,000 endowment to the museum when he moved to New York in 1900. At that time Nickerson also gave the majority of his fine collection of Old Masters and Far Eastern art to the Institute. Nickerson's part in the development of the arts in Chicago paralleled his financial success. Both interests are mirrored in the lavish interior of Nickerson's home on Erie Street.

Nickerson chose Edward Burling of the firm of Burling and Whitehouse to design his home. Burling had begun his career at the age of sixteen as an apprentice to a carpenter in his home town of Newburg, New York. He came to Chicago in 1843 with little formal training and became one of the city's first architects. Burling received commissions for many of Chicago's early buildings. Most of these, such as the Tribune Building, Chamber of Commerce Building, Post Office Building, First National Bank Building, and several important churches including Holy Name Cathedral and St. James Episcopal Church, were destroyed by the fire in 1871. After the fire, Burling formed a partnership with Dankmar Adler which lasted until 1879. During that time the firm's commissions more often involved private homes and this trend continued on into Burling's subsequent partnership with Francis M. Whitehouse. Whitehouse had studied architecture at the University of Gottingen in Germany and was a junior partner with Burling until 1889. The Nickerson house is the firm's most notable residential commission.

The house was designed in 1881 and was not completed until 1883. Lengthy preparations and particularly solid construction were necessary to house the heavy and elaborate marble interior which is the most impressive feature of the house. The exterior seems understated in comparison to the building's interior. The three-story building is faced in grey limestone, now darkened by age, over foot-thick brick bearing walls. Rusticated sandstone at the basement level acts as a solid visual foundation to the smooth ashlar of the three stories above. The basically rectangular building is impressive in its volume and this imparts an appropriate grandeur to the house.

The south facade of the Nickerson house faces Erie Street and has a central entranceway. A curved stairway leads to the entrance porch. Coupled granite columns at the front of the porch support a substantial balcony which opens off the second story. Although the design of the facade is nearly symmetrical, the bay to the west of the porch has angled sides while the bay to the east is rectangular. Both bays extend the height of the building. Double-

hung windows are set uniformly across the facade and are flanked by strongly defined piers and topped by sandstone lintels. Egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel bands accent the lintels. The design of the balcony contributes to the unity of the facade by continuing the horizontal lines at the second-story level. A frieze of alternating vertical bands and rosettes accents the projecting sandstone cornice. There are stringcourses running between each of the three stories and these, along with the cornice, balance the vertical emphasis of the piers.

The impression of symmetry is carried through on the east and west facades, although they exhibit less detail. The window pattern repeats the rhythm of the front facade, but on the east facade there is a curious round oriel at the southern end of the second story. This facade also had a porte-cochere and conservatory at the first-floor level, but these were removed in 1923 when the John B. Murphy Memorial was built to the east of the house. The north facade is the back of the house and therefore was not faced with limestone.

A 1911 photograph of Erie Street showing the Nickerson house. A circular drive and garden were located on the property to the east of the house before the John B. Murphy Memorial was built there.

(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



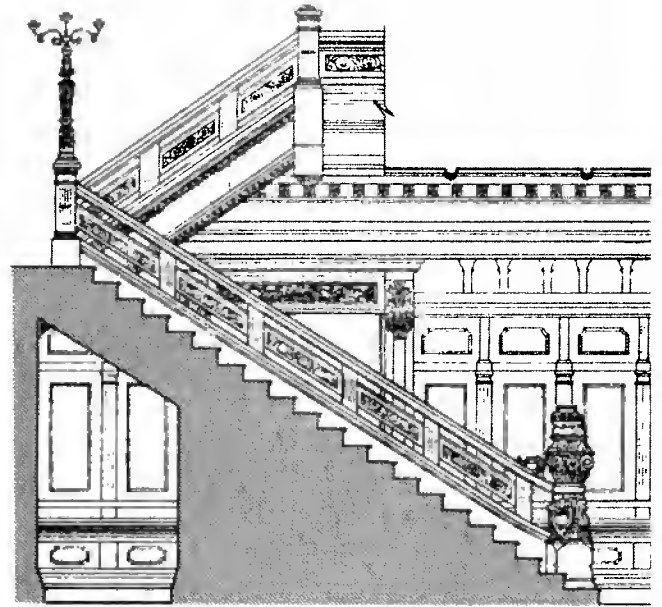
This fairly austere exterior belies the opulent interior of the Nickerson house. In all the formal rooms surrounding the central hallway there is a rich variety of interior decoration which, according to an article in the February, 1883 issue of *Inland Architect*, "reached a standard of excellence never before attained in Chicago." The central hall itself is covered with a lavish profusion of marble so resplendent that the Nickerson house came to be called a "marble palace."

The main central hall and the monumental staircase leading from it are finished in an intricate pattern of inlays and paneling. The red marble floor of the hall is outlined by a geometric pattern of white Italian and black Belgian marbles. Engaged and free-standing marble columns with ornate capitals are situated along the walls which are faced with onyx panels framed by various marbles. The ceiling, supported by an iron framework, is faced with pale marble panels outlined by red Verona marble ribbing. Overlays of moldings and rosettes, ornately carved, are of still another variety of marble. The marble staircase with alabaster open-work railings is flanked by onyx columns.

The decor of the rest of the house is no less elaborate. On the main floor, formal rooms are situated around the hallway. They exhibit a profusion of tiles, marbles, woods, and decorative leather panels on the walls. Many of the rooms contain built-in furniture and fireplaces which are faced with carved and inlaid wood. Some of this furniture incorporates tile and mosaics into its design, producing an overall feeling of abundant detail in the Victorian style.

To the right of the entrance hall at the front of the house is a room which once was Nickerson's home office. Blue tiles face the lower portion of the walls while hand-tooled deep pink leather covers the upper portion. Behind this room is the wine room, which has inlaid wood paneling on the walls and a marble ceiling. The room connects with the dining room, which again has hand-tooled leather wall covering accented with gold leaf. Behind the dining room, in turn, is the service and kitchen area.

The rich variety of marbles seen in this photograph of the entrance hall illustrates the sumptuousness which characterizes the interior of the Nickerson House.



Detail from the Historic American Building Survey drawing depicting the alabaster balustrade and the intricate pattern of marbles facing the walls of the entrance hall.

To the left of the main hall are a series of connecting rooms, finished in a variety of rich materials. At the front is a drawing room paneled in black walnut and delft blue tiles. Behind this is another drawing room done in Cuban mahogany. A handsome ceiling frieze contains hand-carved panels depicting different fruits and flowers. The next room back was once a library; it contains an ebony fireplace and has a particularly elegant parquet floor. From this room a one-story gallery projects off the northwest corner of the house. Originally Nickerson hung his painting collection here. A Tiffany-style dome in the center of the ceiling admits natural light, as there are no other windows in this room.

On the second floor, connecting bedrooms and sitting rooms center around the hallway. A marble balustrade surrounds a rectangular opening in the floor of the hall space, permitting a view of the marble hall below. On the third floor additional bedrooms and guest rooms are arranged around a large central hall. This space was used as a ball-room on special occasions, when a platform for the orchestra was placed above the stairwell.

The decor of the rooms on the upper floors conforms to that of the first-floor rooms. Parquet floors, carved wood trim, and lavish wall coverings vary from room to room in astounding richness. Built-in furnishings in these rooms, like many of the wooden doors throughout the house, are intricately carved and inlaid as was popular in the Victorian era.

Credit for the interior of the "marble palace" must be given not only to Burling, but also to A. Fiedler, a designer for a decorative furniture manufacturer in New York. Fiedler was responsible for the ornately carved woodwork and, to a certain extent, the marble work. It was customary at the time the building was designed, especially for architects with limited academic training, to collaborate with a

decorating firm on interior details. Apparently Fiedler's design for the grand staircase, for example, was taken in place of Burling's own. The completed interior can best be attributed to the efforts of both men.

Fortunately, subsequent owners of the Nickerson house have recognized the importance of preserving the house as it was built and have done little to alter it. After his wife's death, Nickerson and his son left for New York in 1900 and the house was sold to Lucius G. Fisher, president of the Union Paper and Bag Company. Fisher made one major change in the house when he moved in: he commissioned George Maher to transform the gallery into a game room which could also house Fisher's rare book collection. George Maher had worked beside Frank Lloyd Wright in the offices of J. L. Silsbee earlier in his career and his work exhibits a propensity for simplicity of forms in the Prairie school tradition. Maher's preference for large unbroken areas and heavy moldings combined well with the existing design. To the room he added a massive fireplace designed in the then-popular Art Nouveau style. It was faced with glass tile and framed in wood carved by Robert Siefert. Over the newly added center table, also designed by Siefert, an enormous green Tiffany-style lamp, designed by Hilgarth Giannini, was suspended from the dome. A hunting scene worked in metal encircles the bottom of the hanging lamp.

Fisher died in 1919, and the house was offered for sale. Fearing the destruction of the house for lack of a single-family buyer, Charles B. Osborne, on behalf of over one hundred prominent citizens of Chicago, bought and gave the house to the American College of Surgeons. A plaque with the donors' names now hangs on the exterior wall to the right of the front door.

No major alterations have been made to the house, yet during the present ownership several changes have occurred. By way of modernization, the college has added a system of forced-air heating so that no radiators are visible. Many of the original gas lighting fixtures have been inconspicuously wired for electricity. In 1923, the porte-cochere and conservatory were removed when the John B. Murphy Memorial was built directly alongside the Nickerson property. The effect on the house is hardly noticeable from the inside.

The Nickerson house is an example of a unique portion of Chicago's heritage. Very few houses of such overwhelming richness survive today, and Chicago is fortunate that there exists here, intact, such an elaborate Victorian home.

The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepare detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.